

More express trains and tolls, no Route 53 extension on agency's 2050 plan

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Faced with gridlock, flooding, a racial divide and shrinking funds, suburbanites and Chicagoans must think regionally to reach a prosperous 2050, planners said Wednesday.

"It's time for the region to attack its toughest issues," National League of Cities CEO Clarence Anthony said as the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning launched its ON TO 2050 program.

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The plan is a blueprint for housing, transportation, environmental, fiscal and governance policies.

One recommendation that's been a lightning rod in the gubernatorial election is a vehicle miles traveled tax, or VMT tax. Noting that Illinois' road fund is shrinking as vehicles use less fuel, CMAP contends that replacing the gas tax over the long term and instead charging drivers 2 cents a mile would "provide a sufficient, stable revenue source."

ON TO 2050 also prioritizes highway projects, which means those making the cut are eligible for federal dollars. Among the top picks is widening and rebuilding the Eisenhower Expressway, but planners predict the road would have to be tolled to pay for the construction.

One controversial project that ON TO 2050 placed on the back burner is extending Route 53 north into Lake County.

The Illinois tollway is studying the extension, which has been discussed for decades. To meet CMAP goals, the tollway should identify how to pay for a road that will "improve mobility, preserve community character, and preserve environmental quality," the report said.

Other goals of the program:

- Improve signals and tracks on Metra's popular BNSF Line to Aurora. Upgrades could allow the railroad to add express trains at its busiest stations like Naperville and Route 59 in Aurora or open a new stop at Eola Road in Naperville.
- Increase tolling. This "offers a clear path to rebuild the expressway system, while tying new fees to those who use it the most," planners said.
- Consolidate governments. ON TO 2050 recommends merging similar units of government, such as two fire protection districts, to be more efficient and pool revenues.
- Fix the congested nexus of I-290/Route 53/I-90. The report calls for redoing the cloverleaf interchange near the Woodfield Mall in Schaumburg to reduce weaving, gridlock and crashes.
- Update floodplain maps to reflect the increasing severity of storms, gather flooding data and inform residents in high-risk neighborhoods, and use technology to identify flood-prone areas.
- Update regulations that impede building affordable housing and plan holistic communities that reflect a range of incomes to avoid clusters of haves and have-nots that are often racially segregated.

CMAP chief Joseph Szabo checked off challenges ranging from climate change to Illinois' budget dysfunction.

"We're going to have to be more resilient," he said.